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The Causes and Consequences of Abolishing Cantonments in India

Ramanath Jha

Abstract

India's decision to abolish cantonments after carving out the military areas, announced in April 2023, has been met with scepticism and support. Cantonments, primarily created during the British rule to station and house the military, evolved to include civilians as residents and staff to provide support and logistic services. Over time, cantonment boards, with some civilian members, were created to manage the civil areas, but the rights of civilians remained severely restricted. Furthermore, increasing the administrative duties of military officers was seen as diluting the core functions of the military. This paper evaluates the consequences of the decision to abolish cantonments and merge the civilian areas with the nearby municipalities.

In April 2023, the Indian government announced its decision to disband the Khas Yol Cantonment Board in Himachal Pradesh, describing cantonments as an archaic colonial practice.¹ This move is part of a plan to dissolve the 62 army cantonments across the country after carving out the military areas and declaring them as military stations under the complete control of the army.² Areas severed from the military station will be merged with the neighbouring urban local body (ULB), which will be responsible for their governance and administration.³

A cantonment is essentially an area where military troops are garrisoned and is primarily dedicated to housing soldiers (and may also be referred to as ‘military quarters’).⁴ A cantonment comprises military and civilian populations,⁵ while a military station is exclusively for the use and accommodation of military personnel and is established through an executive order.⁶ However, civilian populations are also present within military stations, such as in offices, defence estate departments, and military schools that admit civilian students.⁷

This paper assesses the consequences of the decision to abolish cantonments and merge the civilian areas with the nearby ULBs.

Tracing the Origins and Evolution of India's Cantonment Areas

Cantonments in India first emerged under the rule of the British East India Company (EIC). After the Battle of Plassey (1757),⁸ in which it defeated the Nawab of Bengal and obtained the grant of *diwani* rights^a in 1765⁹ over the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, the EIC sought to establish permanent military stations.¹⁰ These were set up along trade routes, such as the river Ganga,¹¹ at a distance from urban areas to limit the interactions between the army and the local populace in the interest of discipline and over fears that any such proximity could lead to emotional ties that would be detrimental to the EIC's cause.¹² These areas eventually became known as cantonments, or places where the forces were cantoned.

The first three cantonments were established before 1800—Barrackpore Cantonment in present-day West Bengal (1765), Danapur in current Bihar (1765), and St Thomas Mount in the erstwhile Madras (1774).¹³ Eventually, 56 cantonments were established under British rule,¹⁴ located in areas that provided the best vigil over the local population so any dissidence or uprising could be quickly contained. Some of these areas (such as Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi, and Gwalior) saw plenty of anti-British activity.^{15,16}

Six more cantonments were established following India's independence, the last in Ajmer in 1962. Currently, of the 62 cantonments,¹⁷ one is under the army's northern command, four are located in the eastern command, 13 in the western command, 19 are under the southern command, and 25 are under the jurisdiction of the central command.¹⁸ India now only creates military stations that can be fenced off, with the entry and exit fully controlled, to ensure security and prevent any dilution of military functions by civilian intrusion.¹⁹

Given that the primary objective behind establishing cantonments was the quartering of troops, the military was granted the ownership of lands strictly for the construction of barracks. Certain lands were allotted on grants that were freely transferable from one military officer to another.²⁰

a The right to collect taxes and customs revenue.

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There was also a need to provide amenities and services at the cantonments, such as logistics, grocery shops, schools, banks, and post offices, for which civilian populations were hired and provided residence within these areas.²¹ By the mid-nineteenth century, many civilians were residing in cantonments.²² However, the rules clearly stated that land ownership rights could not be transferred to the property holders²³ and that the occupation of these lands was a grant. Over time, the physical layout of cantonments became clearly demarcated—a somewhat integrated but separate military area, a civil area, and a market area.²⁴ While cantonments and the neighbouring settlements were initially separated, the pressures of urbanisation and the inflow of larger populations erased this physical distance. In some cases, they became so intertwined that it became difficult to distinguish the boundaries of the cantonments and the municipal entities that ‘engulfed’ them (for instance, as seen in cantonment areas of Pune, Lucknow, and Delhi).

The regulatory foundation

During British rule, the Cantonments Act of 1889 provided the statutory foundation for cantonments. The subsequent Cantonment Code of 1899 laid down rules on the maintenance of records on the rights of the lands in these areas, as well as rules for leasing out these lands. The Cantonments Act of 1924²⁵ enabled the formation of cantonment boards that provided for elected civilian representation, levy of taxes, and regulation of building and trading activities in these areas. The boards were also empowered to manage their own funds and appoint their own staff.²⁶

The 1924 Cantonments Act also attempted to streamline the administration of military land. As the number of cantonments expanded and the army acquired more and more land, it became essential to systemise their upkeep. However, military officers often did not have sufficient understanding of or expertise in the complexities of land tenures and the administration and maintenance of records.²⁷ The army frequently encountered situations where documents could not be quickly located and large information gaps began to surface.²⁸ The Act addressed this issue by introducing the position of a civilian ‘military estates officer’,²⁹

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independent of the army but co-located with the army establishment to provide advice and guidance in land matters.

The Cantonments Act of 2006 repealed and replaced the 1924 Act.³⁰ However, cantonment boards, as established by the 1924 Act, continued to exist and function as 'deemed municipalities,' albeit with some revisions. The 2006 Act attempted greater democratisation by ensuring parity between the civilian and military members of the board. As mandated by the Constitution (Seventy-Fourth) Amendment Act,^b one-third of the seats were reserved for women. The boards have five-year terms and are classified into four categories depending on the size and population of the cantonment area.³¹ Category I cantonments are those with populations above 50,000; Category II between 10,000 and 50,000; Category III between 2,500 and 10,000; and Category IV with populations below 2,500. A Category I cantonment has eight elected members and eight military/government representatives, while a Category IV cantonment has two elected members and two government/military members on the board.³² The cantonment boards perform civic duties such as providing public health, water supply, sanitation, primary education, and street lighting. The member of parliament and the member of the legislative assembly were made special invitees, but they had no voting rights;³³ administrative control remained with the commanding officer; the station commander was the ex-officio president of the board; and an officer of the Indian Defence Estates Service^c or defence estates organisation was the chief executive officer and member-secretary of the board.

b The Act sought to enable urban local bodies to perform effectively as vibrant democratic units of self-government. It gave them a fixed tenure of five years, provided for reservations for weaker sections and women, proposed a defined functional and financial domain, and introduced the idea of ward committees.

c In 1948, the 'Military Lands and Cantonments Service' was created and subsumed all military estates officers, executive officers of the cantonments, and the officers at the command headquarters and the directorate in the defence ministry. These appointments were made through the civil services examination conducted by the Union Public Service Commission. In 1985, this service was renamed the Indian Defence Estates Service.

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Democratising cantonments

Before independence, concepts associated with local self-government were not particularly accepted in cantonments.³⁴ Any measure of decentralisation that was permitted in larger cantonments with a sizeable civilian population did not change the ground reality that civilians had a secondary place with severe restrictions.³⁵ Attempts to reform the functioning of cantonment administrations—such as the establishment of cantonment boards—were merely cosmetic, and self-government remained severely restricted and bureaucratic.³⁶ In 1948, the S.K. Patil Committee was set up to make recommendations for the removal of civil areas from cantonments. The committee specifically recommended that civilian areas in six cantonments—Agra, Ahmednagar, Allahabad, Varanasi, Delhi, and Jhansi—be merged with the neighbouring ULBs.³⁷ But popular sentiment did not appear to favour such a move, and so the plan was abandoned.³⁸ In 1956-1957, the Estimates Committee of the Parliament (under the leadership of Balwant Rai Mehta) revisited the matter, recommending the formation of pure military stations and the abolition of cantonments,³⁹ and that the states be consulted to effect the changes as quickly as possible.⁴⁰ However, the central government disagreed with these recommendations.⁴¹ It held that the cantonments served a useful purpose, and the general population in cantonments wanted to continue with the existing structure of administration. It further stated that the state governments could not assume the responsibility of overseeing local self-governments in cantonments, especially in the interest of the troops' welfare. The Indian government was also of the view that the administrative architecture of cantonments, with the general officer commanding, ensured the government remained in control and, through it, so did parliament.⁴²

In 1998-99, the Standing Parliamentary Committee on Defence⁴³ opined that allocating defence money for non-defence expenditures (such as to civilian areas in cantonments) should be a “relic of the past”.⁴⁴ Additionally, the 2014 Public Accounts Committee, in its 89th report, expressed displeasure with the management of cantonments, especially the mismanagement of leases and unauthorised construction.⁴⁵ As evident, this issue has been studied and debated in detail for decades by several parliamentary committees, and the government's recent decision to excise the civilian areas from the military stations in cantonments must be seen in this context.

Evaluating the Impending Disbanding of Cantonments

The plan to dissolve cantonments by carving out the civilian areas from the military stations will likely encounter some hurdles. Cantonments with clearly demarcated civilian and military areas (such as Chakrata, Clement Town, and Landour in Uttarakhand, Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh, and Kamptee in Maharashtra) can be easily segregated, while those with closely intertwined areas (such as in Delhi and Lucknow) will likely be difficult to separate.⁴⁶ Still, the disbanding of cantonments across the country is a mammoth task, given that the defence ministry owns approximately 7110.33 sq km of land (of which the army holds 5725.08 sq km),⁴⁷ with approximately 651 sq km of land inside the notified cantonments.⁴⁸

Importantly, the relationship between the civilian populations and the military in the cantonments has not always been cordial, with a defence ministry official once stating that the areas have become unmanageable with clear signs of friction between the two sides.⁴⁹ It would be unwise to let such a situation fester, and dissolving cantonments is a solution.

The abolition of cantonments and the merger of the civilian areas with the neighbouring ULBs have been considered over the years, with many pros and cons emerging. Arguments in favour include (i) taking the military out of civilian political and non-army matters to concentrate solely on military training and war preparedness,⁵⁰ (ii) bringing the civilian population under the umbrella of democratic, civilian governance with popular representation,⁵¹ and (ii) enabling civilians in cantonments to benefit from regulations applicable to other citizens and property holders.⁵²

The excision of civilian areas will relieve military commanders of the onerous responsibilities of carrying out civilian functions and making decisions on non-military matters that essentially affect the local civilian population.⁵³ In the past, military commanders have spent a considerable amount of time resolving civilian issues regarding matters of land, holding court and making rulings in matters of disputes between civilians and cantonment boards. These and similar chores distracted from the primary duties of military training and war preparedness.

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Army officers were often involved in local politics, an area in which they had little background and no training, and which is a function beyond their core military duties.⁵⁴ The disbandment of cantonments is expected to enable a uniform, homogenous management of military stations strictly under army control. In this regard, it is significant to note that the defence ministry stopped the formation of cantonments in independent India after 1962 and established only military stations.⁵⁵ Notably, the proposal to abolish cantonments was first mooted by the army in 2018.⁵⁶ Indeed, endorsing the government's decision to disband the cantonments, one army general remarked that "the cantonments [currently] serve no useful purpose."⁵⁷

Disbanding cantonments will mean that the civilian areas will become part of the democratic decentralisation process prevalent across other urban areas in the country. The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act and individual state statutes will become the operational regulation for the erstwhile cantonment civilian areas, replacing the Indian Cantonments Act of 2006 that tried to balance the decidedly more significant interests of the army by curtailing the civilians' democratic aspirations.

Additionally, there will also be relief from the extreme regulatory regime⁵⁸ imposed on property holders, especially regarding the process of transfer and mutation of properties held on grant or lease, the sub-division and change of purpose, the resumption of properties held on old grant, the renewal of expired leases, the conversion of old grant or leasehold sites in civil areas of the cantonments into freehold, and the restrictions on construction of buildings.⁵⁹ Cantonment residents and representatives expect this easing of restrictions to enable people to carry out need-based alterations and not unregulated commercialisation.⁶⁰

Notably, the poorer sections of the civilian population will now also have access to government social welfare schemes that were previously unavailable to them while they were part of the cantonments.^{d,61}

d Cantonment areas cannot receive development funds since the defence ministry is under the non-plan sector. Non-plan expenditures are spent on the routine functioning of the government. They are not reflected in the plan expenditure, which is incurred on programmes that figure in the current five-year plan. Since 2017-18, they have been classified as Capital and Revenue spending.

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Cantonments also suffered from a lack of resources for development and maintenance works since most of the properties in these areas were owned by the government and on which no tax could be levied. Furthermore, the nature of army activities restricted the volume of trade and business activities in the cantonments. As such, the excision of civil areas from the cantonments will remove the budgetary and business restrictions imposed on them.

At the same time, there are three key arguments against the merger of cantonment civilian areas with ULBs—some allege that it is a political ploy to seize and control developed defence lands for profitable disposal in the future;⁶² it will lead to uncontrolled construction in the merged areas,⁶³ which could be used by undesirable elements (such as the toxic land mafia); and that it will destroy the environmental salubrity of the amalgamated regions.⁶⁴

The main concern pertains to long-standing criticism of the supposed evil intent of the politician-builder lobby⁶⁵ and has been repeated in criticism of the government's recent decision to disband cantonments. Of India's 1,71,839 sq km total urban area (in 2015),⁶⁶ approximately 2,00,000 sq km can be presumed to be the urban geographical region. The total estimated area under notified cantonments is approximately 651 sq km, which is a mere 0.3 percent of all urban land in India. Further, a significant part of this land will be held in military stations that will continue to be under absolute military command. Lands transferred from cantonments to ULBs will be owned by the local bodies, will be subject to specific land uses under the ULB's master plan, and will have to be used only for the purpose specified in the development plan. As such, the argument that the objective behind the disbanding of cantonments is to seize military land does not hold merit. However, the ULBs will need to consider the requirements of the military while assigning other functions to the lands coming under their control. For instance, any new construction close to defence land must adhere to the security guidelines of the military stations.

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There are also some fears that the merger of cantonment areas into ULBs will lead to a spurt in uncontrolled construction and commercialisation, especially in hill stations.^e Development regulations for hill stations differ from those for cities in the plains. If such rules are tightly implemented, it will ensure the overall ambience of hill stations is not destroyed. Notably, the Himalayas are young mountains with high risk due to uncontrolled development. Every year, Uttarakhand experiences landslides and floods as the numerous multi-storeyed hotels along the valleys have destroyed the ecosystem and soil stability, and there have been serious instances of land sinking (such as in Joshimath in early 2023⁶⁷). Any similar development in the vicinity of cantonment towns will prove a risk for the military units as well.

Many cantonment towns have experienced stunted growth due to stifling restrictions. Data for all 62 cantonments show they had an aggregate population of 21,03,375 in 2001, increasing to 21,38,136 in 2011,⁶⁸ a 1.62 percent increase in a decade as against the average decadal rise of over 3 percent in India's urban areas.⁶⁹ This indicates that urbanisation in the cantonment areas was severely impeded,⁷⁰ and the restrictions aggravated the demographic^f and built pressure on the cities in which they were located or sometimes encircled. Under current conditions, it is expected that density in the erstwhile cantonment area and the city area will eventually even out.

e The British established many cantonments in hill stations to escape the oppressive heat and humidity in the plains and serve as sanatoriums to recover from illnesses. There are currently over 20 hill station cantonments, including Landour, Kasauli, Chakrata, Ranikhet, Nainital, Almora, and Lansdowne in Uttarakhand; Shillong in Meghalaya; Pachmarhi in Madhya Pradesh; Dalhousie, Dagshai, Kasuali, and Yol in Himachal Pradesh; Darjeeling in West Bengal; Wellington and Ooty in Tamil Nadu; and Mount Abu in Rajasthan.

f Twenty-seven cantonments saw a decline in population between 2001 and 2011. For instance, Pune cantonment, with an area of 11.9 sq km, lost a population of about 10,000 between 2001 and 2011 (amounting to a 15 percent decrease), resulting in a population density of 6,700 persons per sq km in contrast to Pune city's density of above 7000 persons per sq km. Similarly, Aurangabad cantonment lost 1,121 persons and had a population density of 1,876 persons per sq km as against the city density of over 10,000 persons per sq km; Agra cantonment lost 3,145 persons, resulting in a population density of 1,084 persons per sq km as against Agra city's density of over 11,000 persons per sq km.

Evaluating the Impending Disbanding of Cantonments

In the non-hill station merged areas, property holders will see some relief since they will be governed by municipal laws. The merger will likely lead to the removal of stifling restrictions on construction and economic activity, and propel more urbanisation in those areas, yielding some revenue for the ULBs. However, such construction will have to abide by the Defence Act, which prohibits construction within 1000 yards of defence works.⁷¹

ULBs and their fragile finance

A key concern related to the merger of cantonment civilian areas with ULBs is that the municipalities will be unable to provide the new areas with decent standards of services. This is likely true—the quality of civic services is unlikely to improve, and citizens are unlikely to get better governance. Cities are already struggling to provide services to areas within their jurisdiction as their financial position is precarious, rendered weaker since the onset of the goods and services tax and the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition.⁷² Most ULBs also have an insufficient workforce, and the new areas will bring limited revenue, and add pressure on the already constrained workforce and finances of the overburdened cities. The states are also not inclined to help cities, especially as these administrations struggle with resources.⁷³ Similarly, city councillors are unlikely to allow funds from their own political constituencies to be diverted to newer ones in the merged areas.

The impending mergers will certainly highlight that cities cannot be left to fend for themselves, and that the Indian government and the states must step in to fund the growing unfunded mandate of the cities. In the absence of such financial assistance, the move to merge cantonment civilian areas with ULBs will be counterproductive regarding infrastructure and amenities and will be limited merely to providing relief to individuals on a personal basis on matters of property ownership, a more liberal construction regime, and in access to welfare schemes.

Evaluating the Impending Disbanding of Cantonments

Reviewing cantonments and their locations

The cantonments and military stations that were established during British times should be properly reviewed in terms of their locational relevance in the current circumstances. The primary objective of the army has long evolved from overseeing the civilian population to protecting India's borders. The change in locational advantages may result in certain military stations being closed entirely, with some others being shifted to more strategic geographies for better military oversight. For instance, military stations that are in the midst of large towns and are completely engulfed by such settlements should be thoroughly examined from the security angle, and, if necessary, shifted to safer locations where the army can continue its regular activities unimpeded.

However, shifting military units to new, undeveloped locations cannot be at the cost of the quality of life and city amenities that are already available to such units. Any relocation will involve the acquisition of fresh, sufficient, and favourable land, and the construction of all such infrastructure required to maintain the same quality of life as previously available. This may even involve creating an entirely new city. As such, these factors must be considered for any potential relocation.

“A key concern related to the merger of cantonment civilian areas with ULBs is that the municipalities will be unable to provide the new areas with decent standards of services.”

The decision to abolish cantonments is in keeping with the needs of the times and, as such, is well-considered. Given the presence of inimical countries around India, the military needs to completely devote itself to the major task of defending the borders and should not be weighed down by functions unrelated to soldiers and war. Since the responsibility of overseeing civilian areas will rest with the ULBs once all 62 cantonments are disbanded, the defence budget can redirect the funds it would have spent on these areas to core military requirements and social infrastructure wherever needed. This was reiterated by the defence ministry admitting that, by discarding the civilian areas, the defence budget would, to an extent, be unburdened.⁷⁴ At the same time, the central and state governments will have a greater responsibility to fund the ULBs, which have been deprived of their revenue under the goods and services tax regime that has subsumed many streams of municipal taxes. It is only such a sharing of resources that will permit the ULBs to oversee the erstwhile cantonment civilian areas and provide them with a certain standard of services. [ORF](#)

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